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Philippines soldiers did not kill anti-mining advocates, spokesman says

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NCR Today

QUEZON CITY, Philippines -- The Philippines military has denied that paramilitary forces are behind the deaths of anti-mining activists and said that extrajudicial killings and human rights abuse are not part of their policy.

"It has never been the policy of the [Armed Forces of the Philippines] to use force beyond legal means," spokesman Col. Arnulfo Burgos Jr. told reporters at a press conference Thursday in Camp Aquinaldo, Quezon City.

Burgos made the statement after the New York-based Human Rights Watch claimed it had documented three killings of environment activists since October and suspected militiamen had not been apprehended.

The human rights group said the three anti-mining activists were killed by paramilitary forces that might have links with the Philippines' armed forces. Relatives and friends said the victims had reported being followed by military.

The activists are:

- Margarito J. Cabal, 47, an organizer of a group opposing a hydroelectric dam in Bukidnon province was shot May 9. Police have not investigated the death and no suspect has been arrested, the human rights group states.
- Dao village chief Jimmy Liguyon in San Fernando town in Bukidnon was shot March 5. He was supposedly killed for blocking mining investment by refusing to sign a required agreement. He also reported being followed and watched by the military.

- Italian priest Fr. Fausto Tentorio, 59, was killed in his parish church compound in Arakan, North Cotabato province, on Oct. 17. The priest of the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions was a longtime advocate of tribal rights and opponent of mining in the area, Human Rights Watch states. No one has been arrested in his death, though the National Bureau of Investigation has recommended charges against four suspects.

Human Rights Watch states President Benigno Aquino III has done little to stop attacks on environmental activists. On July 7, Aquino signed Executive Order No. 79, which aims to institutionalize reforms in the Philippines mining sector by "providing policies and guidelines to ensure environmental protection and responsible mining," the human rights group noted.

The group criticized the executive order's silence on the issue of human rights abuses that stem from mining investments and on the issue of deployment of paramilitaries at the mines investment in the Philippines.

In Manila, Jesus Vicente "Jayvee" Garganera, national coordinator of Alyansa Tigil Mina (Stop Mining Alliance) told *NCR* his group and its partners -- including the Catholic bishops' National Secretariat for Social Action, Justice and Peace -- had written Aquino in August and again in March seeking his revocation of an order of former President Gloria Arroyo activating the investment defense forces.

The order allows state enforcement agencies -- military, Philippine National Police and paramilitary forces -- to be activated to defend investments in communication, power and the extractive industries.

"So if you are into telecommunications, power utility, [or] an oil, gas or mining company, you can actually ask the government to deploy, train and utilize military and police at your company's expense to secure the area of operations," Garganera said.

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In February 2009, Arroyo created the Investment Defense Force to safeguard mining and power facilities and other infrastructure against attacks by communist guerrillas. She announced its creation days after communist rebels raided a gold processing plant in Compostela Valley and bombs hit towers of the National Transmission Corporation in Northern Mindanao.

Garganera said he and his group wanted that order revoked, but it was not mentioned in Aquino's new executive order.

Burgos, the armed forces spokesman, said he wants Human Rights Watch to support its claims with evidence and file complaints in the "proper venue." He said he would cooperate with any probe of the armed forces.

Army spokesman Maj. Harold Cabunoc expressed sadness over accusations against the armed forces and asked why its critics said nothing about atrocities of communist rebels.

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